The Treatment of Immigrant Experience in Jhumpa Lahiri's *The Name Sake*

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Indian writing in English is one of the voices in which India speaks. It spreads the traditional and cultural heritage of India within India and also introduces it to the whole world. It is Indian in sensibility, thought, feeling and emotion and experience but submits itself to the discipline of English for expression.

The contemporary novelists tread new paths and this shows the vitality of Indian fiction. Arun Joshi, Khushwant Singh, Salman Rushdie and Vikram Seth depict the Indian social scene, the partition scene, the theme of alienation and the social, economic and psychological problems of modern man.

Writers who are cultural hybrids like Maxine Hongkinstun, Gloria Naylor, Alice Walker, Bharati Mukherjee, Jhumpa Lahiri and many others take up issues like identity crisis, nationalism, alienation, marginalization, insider – outsider and the hegemonic power discourses in the fiction that they are writing today.

Jhumpa Lahiri as an immigrant novelist clearly fits into the school of writers better known as the writers of the 'Indian Diaspora'. The word 'diaspora' has been taken from Greek, meaning "to disperse".

> 'Diaspora', is the voluntary or forcible movement of peoples from their homelands into new regions…. [Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin]

Normally, disapora fiction lingers over alienation, loneliness, homelessness, existential rootlessness, nostalgia, questioning, protest and assertions and the quest for identity; it also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of cultures, discriminating margins of two different social milieus, internalizing nostalgia and suffering a forced amnesia. We may call it a literary / cultural phenomenon with a distinct melting pot syndrome or that of a salad bowl where the identity of each ingredient is under question.

Diaspora is the communities of people living together in one country who "acknowledge that the old country as a nation often buried deep in language, religion, custom or folklore, always has some claim on their loyalty and emotions".(qtd.in.Kaur, 192)

Diasporic experience is a spring of agonized inspiration, multiple identities, new subjectivities, creative memories and fresh perspectives of language and life. The earlier immigrant works of the neo-colonial and post-colonial works were often a product of forced immigration of people running away from religious and other political or social persecution. But several Indians who migrated to America in the mid 1970s and afterwards were in search of a better life, and material success and prosperity.

The Criterion

Jhumpa Lahiri was born in 1967 and raised in Rhode Island. She was the daughter of Bengali parents. She was influenced by both Indian and American culture and heritage. This multi-cultural life style plays a central role in many of her stories, which depict the alienation and loneliness of immigrants caught between two drastically different worlds.

Her novel, *The Namesake* focuses on the lives of Indians and Asians who have migrated abroad. Her writings tell us about the adjustment problems of Indians (both first and second generations) who have now settled in America. The tension between adhering to Indian culture and imbibing American culture, between upholding family tradition and subscribing to the individual freedom and realization that one is an outsider even though one is born there is beautifully highlighted in her works.

Jhumpa Lahiri portrays immigrant experience and the clash of cultures. The conflicts portrayed in the novel bring great empathy to Gogol as he stumbles along the first – generation path, strewn with conflicting loyalities, comic detours and wrenching love-affairs. With penetrating insight, she reveals not only the defining power of the names and expectations bestowed upon us by our parents but also the means by which we slowly, sometimes painfully, come to define ourselves.

The Namesake, is the story of the Ganguli family. Following an arranged marriage in Calcutta, Ashoke and Ashima Ganguli move to the U.S. and settle in Cambridge and Massachusetts. An engineer working at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Ashoke adapts more quickly to life in America in contrast to his wife, who resists all things American and pines for her family, in Kolkatta. When a son is born to Gangulis, they are faced with the realization that they cannot wait for a suitable name for the child.

Ashoke names the boy Gogol after a Russian writer, whose book he credits with saving his life. But Gogol who does not know the reason for giving him this name, is unable to identify either with the Americans or with the Indians. Intimately interacting with the American environment, the Indian diaspora continues to feel that they are the outsiders even though they have an insider's insight.

The question of cultural identity occurs in Lahiri's writings. In India no single culture exists. Too many cultures have crossed and blended here, and produced a hybridity in us that cannot now unmix. The Indian cultural identity has acquired a heterogeneous composition with today's youth who are on the move in search of better jobs.

Hence the bonding between the people and the settlement is fast disappearing. The familiarity and uniformity of basic cultures across communities in the states of India makes for easier assimilation and preservation of one's own culture. But when one leaves India and goes abroad, one realizes that even though one may try and assimilate with that culture, yet it is a baffling new world. The west which appeared alluring when one viewed it from one's locale, appears complex and complicated when one settles there and realizes that one is exiled by choice from one's home.

Immigration is the movement of people from one country or area of the world to another to establish a new permanent residence. People become immigrants primarily for economic, political or religious motives. The U.S. has often been called the "melting pot". The name is delivered from the United States' rich tradition of

The Criterion

immigrants coming to the U.S. looking for lucrative jobs and having their cultures melted and incorporated into the fabric of the country.

Most of them (immigrants) were not highly educated and did not possess wealth or power in their home countries other than these few commonalities of what they didn't possess, their backgrounds were vastly different. The thread, however, that bound these immigrants together was their vision of improving their current situation.

Emma Lazarus, in a poem entitled "The New Colossus", which is inscribed on the pedestal of the statue of liberty tells of the invitation extended to those wanting to make the U.S. their home. "….Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breath free". (Encyclopedia Americana, 1998, Vol.637)

To a question in an internet interview, regarding Lahiri as a child of immigrants in America and the conflicts she felt while growing up, she says,

> It was always a question of allegiance of choice. I wanted to please my parents and meet their expectations. I also wanted to meet the expectations of my American peers, and the expectations I placed on myself to fit into American society.

She adds that it's a classic case of divided identity, but depending on the degree to which the immigrants in question are willing to assimilate, the conflict is more or less pronounced. Her parents were fearful and suspicious of America and American culture when she was growing up. Maintaining ties with India, and preserving the Indian tradition in America, meant a lot to them.

The first generation immigrants try to stick to the mannerisms, values and beliefs of their own culture and any clash between their concept of "home" and their beliefs baffle them. In most of the second generation people these emotional links and ties with the past in most of the matters are loosened. They mainly go by American styles in food and habits, and their marital relations too are crumbling.

The term first generation immigrant may be used to describe either of two classes of people. One may be, an immigrant to a country, possible with the caveat that they must be naturalized to receive this title. The second class may be the children of immigrant parents, first in a family line to be born in the new country. The ambiguity of this term extends to the term "second generation immigrant", which may refer to the first generation born in the new country, or the first generation born to parents who were themselves born in the new country.

The living 'in-between' condition is very painful and marginalizing for them. There is the yearning for "home", to go back to "the lost origin", and "imaginary homelands" are created from the fragmentary and partial memories of their homelands.

The novel opens with Ashima recalling her homeland fondly. She is in an advanced state of pregnancy, admitted in a hospital for her delivery. To quote,

> ….nothing feels normal to Ashima. For the past eighteen months, ever since she's arrived in Cambridge, nothing has felt normal at all. Its not so much the pain, which she knows, somehow, she will survive. It's the consequence: Motherhood in a foreign land. …. It was happening so far from home, unmonitored and unobserved by those she loved. *(The Namesake 6)*

The Criterion

They also face cultural dilemma when their cultural practices are mocked at and there is a threat to their cultural identity. They stand bewildered and confused, and show resistance also to the discourse of power in various forms. In the following generations these confusions, problems and yearnings become less intense as they get influenced by the culture of that country and also adapt themselves to it.

To a question in an internet interview, regarding her immigrant experience, Jhumpa Lahiri says,

> …The way my parents explain it to me is that they have spent their immigrant lives feeling as if they are on a river with a foot in two different boats. Each boat wants to pull them in a separate direction, and my parents are always torn between the two. They are always hovering, literally straddling two worlds….

She feels an immigrant must teach us so much about the world and about human beings, things we can't understand if we are born and raised and live our whole life in one place.

"The generational differences" of the migrants and their children occupy different spaces in the 'representative' culture but their experiences of feeling rootless and displaced can be similar on nature. Though the children born to migrant peoples enjoy better settlement and place in that country "their sense of identity borne from living in a diaspora community is influenced by the past migrant history of their parents or grand parents".

Ashima tries to settle in and adjust herself to her surroundings, but she feels strange and lost in this country and spends hours remembering her parents and family, and reading the same five Bengali novels time and again. While waiting for the child to be born, she relives the past until the point of her depature for Boston. The thought of bringing up a baby in an alien land terrifies her.

> …to raise a child in a country where she is related to no one, where she knows so little, where life seems so tentative and spare. (The Namesake 6)

Ashima gives birth to a boy and he is named Gogol after the Russian writer Nikolai Gogol. She feels,

> without a single grandparent or uncle or aunt, at her side, the baby's birth, like most everything else in America, feels somehow haphazard, only half true …. She never known of a person entering the world so alone, so deprived. (The Namesake 25)

Gogol who does not know the reason for giving him this name, is unable to identify either with the Americans or with the Indians.

Gradually Ashoke and Ashima's circle of Bengali acquaintances grow and the cultural spirit of Bengal is recreated whenever the friends meet. Robert Cohen comments that distinct diaspora communities are constructed out of the,

> ….conference of narratives of the old country to the new which create the sense of shared history.

As Ashoke and Ashima continue to maintain a solidarity with the community, they identify Gogol continues to search for his own identity, for a set code that will not make him feel an "insider – outsider".

The Criterion

The first time his parents leave him alone overnight he goes with his friends Colin, Jason and Marc to a party in the university where his father teaches. This is his first visit to a dorm. There he meets a girl and he introduces himself as Nikhil and "he feels at once guilty and exhilarated". (The Namesake 96)"Stunned at how easy it is" to say Nikhil, he who never dated a girl before and feels brave. He manages to kiss her before he goes. But it hadn't been Gogol but Nikhil, *"That Gogol had nothing to do with it"*(The Name Sake 96)

One must note the dual identity or identity crisis in Gogol. Prior to his depature for college, Gogol officially changes his name to Nikhil. But even though he had longed to change his name, he finds that he has to get used to being called Nikhil. And when his parents also refer to him as Nikhil he feels, "… in that instant that he is not related to them, not their child". (The Namesake 106)

Ashoke and Ashima make adjustments which are absolutely necessary. They try to bring up their children the way it is done in India. Sonia and Gogol try to assert their individuality, and Gogol goes to the extent of reminding his parents that he is eighteen.

Ashoke and Ashima cannot think of Pemberton Road as their home, but Nikhil refers to his New Haven hostel as his home. Ashima is outraged by his remark. "….Sorry, I left it at home" (The Name Sake 108). Ashima says

> ….that after twenty years in America, She still cannot bring
> Herself to refer to Pemberton Road as home. *(*The Namesake 108*)*

Though Ashoke and Ashima have a large circle of Bengali migrants as their friends; the sense of alienation can be felt in them. Gogol and Sonia, American born and educated, want to be accepted as Americans. However, they feel alienated both from their parents and from their American friends who consider them as outsiders. The insider outsider feeling is prevalent in all migrants.

It is through the eyes of the first generation settlers that the second generation learns about their homeland. The idea of 'home' is central to all human beings in every culture. Having sampled the pleasures and pains of the world, one longs to return to one's home. Ashoke and Ashima's body language and demeanour change, the minute they are in India. They are more confident and assertive. It is true that every time one returns one comes back to a different home, because times change and so do people, but nevertheless it is a home where one's roots are anchored.

The first generation wants to preserve their culture and customs in the foreign land. It is significant that every other Saturday Ashoke and Ashima send Gogol for Bengali language and culture classes at the home of one of their Bengali friends. But,

> The children in the class study without interest, wishing they
> could be at a ballet or softball practice instead. *(*The Namesake 66*)*

Lahiri also shows that most of the first generation people adjust well and make a space for themselves in the new country. Ashima is a good example of Lahiri's first generation people. She tries to adapt herself with the society, she tries to work in a library and manages to drive a car by herself. They concede to Sonia and Gogol's demand of celebrating Christmas, and having an American dinner once a week.

However, when Gogol gets involved with Ruth, they disapprove openly saying 'You're too young to get involved this way. (The Namesake 117)

The Criterion

> When Ruth goes off to oxford to do a course he misses her and he,
> …longs for her as his parents have longed, all these years,
> for the people they love in India… for the first time in his life,
> he knows this feeling. *(*The Namesake 117*)*

He attends a panel discussion about Indian novels written in English. There the question about marginality is discussed.

> Teleologically speaking, ABCDs are unable to answer the
> question 'where are you from?' the sociologist on the panel
> declares. *(*The Namesake 118*)*

Gogol realizes that ABCD [ABCD stands for American born confused "desi"] refers to him also. He ponders over the question of identity.

After graduating Gogol gets a job in a firm and is posted in New York. He meets Maxine and is invited by her for dinner. While eating dinner with Maxine's parents, he recalls his mother's hospitable nature and how, "*She would never have served so few dishes to a quest.*" (The Namesake 133)

Lahiri shows that comparisons and contrast between Indian culture and Western culture are bound to occur. Cultural displacement involves the loss of language, family ties and a support system.

Salman Rushdie says,

> A full migrant suffers, traditionally, a triple disruption. He
> loses his place, he enters into alien language, he finds himself
> surrounded by beings whose social behavior and codes are
> unlike and sometimes even offensive to his own. And this is
> what makes a migrant such a pathetic figure, because roots,
> language and social norms have been three of the most
> important parts of the definition of what it is to be human
> being.

For the second generation the question of identity is a complicated issue. At home Indian culture and value system are adhered to, while in public the American code of conduct is followed. This becomes doubly problematic. Added to this is the fact that Ashoke, Ashima and all first generation settlers want their children to do well and get good jobs. The American dream looms in their eyes and they want their children to exploit the situation and derive the maximum benefit for themselves, but they must follow the Indian moral and cultural code at home.

However, Gogol, Sonia, as well Moushumi want to chart out their own lives. Gogol's shifting in with Maxine is an assertion of his independence, and his desire to completely merge with the American culture. Gogol eventually marries Moushumi, but they are not happy and so they part.

Ashoke dies, and Ashima decides to sell the house on Pemberton Road. Hence forth she would spend six months in India and six months in the states.

> True to the meaning of her name, she will be without
> borders, without a home of her own, a resident everywhere
> and nowhere *(*The Namesake 276*)*

Initially when she had come in 1967, she had been petrified of living in America. But now as she makes the journey back home alone, she is no longer terrified.

The Criterion

It is the last Christmas party at Pemberton Road after the death of Ashoke. Gogol, Sonia and her fiancé Ben, and other guests gather around Ashima to enjoy this moment. Gogol goes to get his father's camera and finds the book, which his father had given him on his birthday and which he had never bothered to open and read. As the party goes on downstairs, he sits on his bed and begins to read the book.

The first generation migrants face cultural dilemma but do their best to retain their cultural identity and cultural practices in their beliefs, values, cloths and eating habits. These 'beliefs, traditions, customs, behaviours and values along with their 'possessions and belongings' are carried by migrants with them when they arrive in "new places". The children of the migrants do not face the same problems because of their parents living "here now". Thus Lahiri has shown dynamically the shifting concepts of 'home' and 'displacement' in the successive generations of migrants.

Lahiri uses her own craft, technique, style, format and structure. Her narrative voice is elegant, bitter sweet and gentle. Her novel talks of Indian culture, traditions, including food and festival, clothes and customs.

Her novel, *The Namesake*, exhibits her signature style and in it she revisits issues that she knows well, those of cultural displacement, sense of identity, and belonging with one foot in two words.

Lahiri gracefully shifts the narrative focus from the Ganguli parents to Gogol as he reaches school age. Gogol struggles with his name, which he regards as absurd and inappropriate. The issue of culture permeates the novel, from the early dislocation of immigration in the first half of the novel to Gogol's departure from home to Yale University.

This transition is marked by Gogol's decision to change his name to Nikhil. Gogol's college experience in one way resembles what might be called typical; he falls in love; he discovers architecture; he begins to assert, against his parent's desires, his independence and individuality. And yet his experiences are always complicated by the particular, as in any life. Gogol can never, even when he moves to New York to work in a large architecture firm, shake his past, his culture or his name as he wishes to do. The novel exposes the fallacy of the American myth of self-creation.

Gogol grows up, moves out and goes through life suffering personal tragedies that also shape his identity. The novel ends with Gogol in his early thirties. Although the novel never feels busy or hectic, the characters are always in transit.

America and the west have always been idealized by the Indians. But when qualified Indian migrate to America then the adjustment problems begin between the traditions, one has inherited and the day to day life one encounters there. There is a gradual adjustment, and assimilation and then a hybrid culture comes to the fore. Gradually one develops a respect for other cultures even though one's own culture remains ingrained within oneself. Culture is not defined now-a-days by a place, it is defined by time 'the now'.

As identity becomes the core issue, names become quite significant. The expressive function of a name varies from culture to culture. In Lahiri's novel, Indian names, the Indian identity of her characters become potent symbols and tools to highlight the immigrant identity. Lahiri's works are scattered with details of

The Criterion

traditional Indian names, food items, cooking details and wardrobe lists providing the Indian an ethnic touch.

In Lahiri's novel *The Namesake* the role of memory in a process of change is often used by the writer in an effective way. Memory plays tricks on all of us. Memory often idealises its perception of a place to convince oneself that there is one entity which remained constant in world of flux.

Food in the novel is a talisman, a reassuring bit of the homeland to cling to. Spices and flavor waft through like themes in a piece of music as evidenced by the following passage.

> …with the samosas, there are breaded chicken, cutlets,
> chickpeas with tamarind sauce, lamb biriyani, chutney made
> with tomatoes from the garden. *(*The Namesake 148*)*

Lahiri uses food as a tool to explain Bengali culture: and also tries to distinguish it from other cultures.

For example :

> ….Gogol's annaprasan, his rice ceremony thre is no baptism
> for Bengali babies, No ritualistic naming in the eyes of God.
> Instead, the first formal ceremony of their lives centers
> around the consumption of Solid food. (The Namesake 38)

Ashima is shocked to see whiskey and wine bottles instead of cereals and tea on top of the refrigerator in Judy's house. Here Lahiri emphasizes cultural difference through food. Lahiri is keenly sensitive to the fine ruptures and sudden disjunctures which make the familiar alien, which delink one from the ties of humanity, family kin leaving one with the acute sense of being alone. She maps the emotional lines of her characters.

Lahiri's elegant prose guides us through their lives. Toward the end of the novel Gogol's mother, Ashima, thinks, "They are not willing to accept, to adjust, to settle for something less than their ideal of happiness" That pressure has given way, in the case of the subsequent generation, to American common sense". The perpetual tensions between cultures, between individual minds, between the mind and the world beyond it, runs through this empathetic, beautiful novel.

The Criterion

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The Criterion